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Sunday, March 18, 2007

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Agriculture center to showcase state's farming heritage



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Byron Crawford

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History is in the making on a farm in the heart of Kentucky.

A picturesque pasture along U.S. 127 in Mercer County could soon become a grand showcase for Kentucky agriculture -- past, present and future.

The Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center, to be built on 50 acres carved from a corner of the 7,200-acre Anderson Circle Farm, will be a fully staffed facility similar in scope to the Kentucky History Center in Frankfort.

For months designers have been working on a center, expected to cost \$50 million to \$60 million, that will blend Kentucky's rich agricultural history with leading-edge learning technologies.

A museum featuring both revolving and permanent exhibits, an agriculture hall



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The Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center will be built on 50 acres in Mercer County. (Courtesy of Harvey Mitchell)

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of fame and a 250-seat theater will share space with a 1,000-seat meeting complex and banquet facilities.

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large tractor using a simulator.

"Many of us realize that the heritage we had growing up in the country is disappearing ... and the farther we get removed from the farm, we think the more important it is that we get on with this," said Harvey Mitchell, who has guided the planning as board chairman.

Mitchell views the center as a place where urban and rural populations from across Kentucky and elsewhere can strengthen ties by reaching a deeper understanding. Livestock, grain and tobacco producers, as well as the Kentucky Farm Bureau, Women in Agriculture and others, will share their stories and answer questions.

"We want it to be a destination site for schoolchildren, tourists and others who come for meetings," Mitchell said.

The nonprofit center would be a joint public-private project.

Although a number of counties were considered for the Heritage Center site, incentives from Mercer County, its central location and the donation of 50 acres of prime farmland by Ralph Anderson -- plus donations of design services by Anderson's Cincinnati-based engineering firm, Belcan Corp. -- helped tip the selection committee's decision in Mercer County's favor.

Energy exhibits -- windmills, geothermal, solar -- will be a part of the center's environmental emphasis.

A retail store will market Kentucky produce and merchandise. And an authentic farmstead on the grounds will feature walking tours of farm culture, from primitive beginnings to mechanization to interactive, high-tech exhibits in which youngsters may "drive" a



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The site is within a two-hour drive of nearly a quarter-million schoolchildren and along four-lane U.S. 127.

The General Assembly ordered a feasibility study for establishing a museum of Kentucky agriculture in 2002, and two years ago a bipartisan board with statewide input from government and private organizations began detailed planning.

"When you think of a heritage center, you automatically think of the past," said interim director David Sparrow. "I think it's important for people to know about the past in agriculture -- but we've come a long way since the horse and the plow, and we also want this center to be about the present and the future ... a gathering place for agriculture."

If projected funding from private sources and state government is successful, the Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center will be under construction by next year and could open by 2010.

For more information go to www.kyagheritage.org

Byron Crawford's column appears on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Reach him at (502) 582-4791 or bcrawford@courier-journal.com. Comment on this column, and read previous columns, at www.courier-journal.com/byron.

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